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Always on the Margins: Early U.S. Experimental Film

a lecture for the symposium, "The Origins of Modernism: Early 20th Century Perspectives on American Culture," Mary and Leigh Block Gallery, April 6, 1991.

The other lecturers at this symposium address their specific concern within the framework of established art traditions: literature, photography, dance, music, and watercolor. Whatever changes they note, whatever modernism comes to mean, their discussion takes place with a clear canon their artists join, deform, or reject, and a solidly established institutional framework or "artworld" that allows for production and innovation. But to talk of independent art film before World War 2, I cannot talk in the same way for two central reasons.

First, there is no established canon or tradition. Therefore it's deceptive to even use the term avant-garde, for there is no main body or rear guard to discuss. There are only individually variant examples which have been retrospectively grouped and that very grouping, I would argue has been to serve other agendas. In other words, a history has been written which

then validates the historian's own evaluation of the present. The clearest example, and certainly the currently dominant reading of the early U.S. art film has been stated by P. Adams Sitney in his *Visionary Film*: ...According to Sitney, before Maya Deren's first film, *Meshes of the Afternoon*, in 1943, all the significant examples of independent film art are pale derivatives of the European avant garde cinema. The achievement of *Meshes* is that it marks a truly new American cinema, a expression of the visionary tradition of (essentially British literary) Romanticism. (It might help to know that Sitney wrote his book after being a student of literary critic Harold Bloom at Yale whose best known early study of th English Romantics, *The Visionary Company*, was clearly on Sitney's mind. [I've developed a critique of Sitney elsewhere at some length; Bloom is subsequently better known as a defendant in a sexual harassment case at Yale, at least among feminist academics] Others have simply continued Sitney's interpretation, such as John Hanhardt in and Lucy Fisher in the MOMA Film catalogue.

Second, there was not, until after WW2, a sufficient and stable institutional setting to actually have an independent art cinema in the U.S. The first museum series, the first regular academic film departments, the first film societies which created the space to actually screen experimental cinema did not exist until after the war, so what we find if we look for an artworld earlier is an assortment of precursor, temporary, and emerging institutions none of which was stable enough to actually assure that any one artist could actually have a career, even as an unpaid artist.

To draw a conclusion from these two situations, or (perhaps more accurately) to state my own underlying position, what we have is a situation which underlines the always present, even when unacknowledged interrelationship between aesthetics and sociology, between art objects, performances, or texts, and the artworld that brings them into being. And a correlary position: This relationship is always clarified by thorough historical investigation.

But before proceeding any further, I should establish a few terms and concepts that guide my analysis here. I'm sure that it's already crossed the minds of some that of course the cinema as a commercial entity did exist before and during the time frame I am using here. And of course we might want to argue that many examples of the commercial entertainment film, or perhaps the entire institution, deserves the term "art." We have only to think of the work of D. W. Griffith or Charlie Chaplin or Joseph Von Sternberg to give assent to the idea of "film art" in the Hollywood dramatic narrative film. But we might also remember that the period of the economic-industrial consolidation of the U.S. film industry at the end of the "teens, that is the creation of the Hollywood studio system, and the definitive coalescing of what is now called the "Classic Hollywood Film" as a form around 1920 takes place precisely when we can begin to talk of the first stirrings of an early American avantgard cinema. In other words, I am arguing that these two phenomenae are related, and that with the creation of a dominant

commercial film art we have the possibility of an ongoing alternative or marginal noncommercial film art.

We may recognize some people, typically directors (a point of controversy within film studies), in the commercial system. However, there is also a strong sense with which we recognize those figures who, in the capitalist era of human history, essentially since the rise of Romanticism in the west, operate not simply within the commercial-industrial production of art and its attendant institutions, but who chose to see themselves (perhaps naively) as autonomous professionals, as artists who stand in a critical relationship to the tradition of their own medium (particularly in its institutionalized forms, be those of academic art or successful gallery art) and who thus are recognized as producing art for personal, expressive purposes while maintaining a career orientation to the field.

Now that's a sentence worthy of a German art historian, so let me repeat it.

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Certainly almost all the figures celebrated in this exhibition and in the symposium are artists in that sense, even though they may have also some experience in the commercial-industrial sector. [I'm putting aside here the issue of cross over, independent sector as training ground, etc.]

So, within the framework of looking for film art which is produced by an artist under essentially artisanal conditions, and distributed and exhibited without direct and overriding concern for commercial profitability, we find ourselves defining the field using three necessary but unsatisfactory terms: independent, experimental, and avant garde. As I said, we can speak of the avant garde, but with respect to film we then have no main body or rear guard for this movement to be in advance of. But the term may be useful in letting us make a bridge to the other arts, and to describe those artists who work in film as well as in other arts, and who sometimes have an allegiance to a well recognized forward looking art movement. And in fact one of the virtues of this symposium is that it creates the conditions for considering early U.S. art cinema as part of a more general development in the various arts, as part of U.S. culture at a moment of decisive change. In fact I was inspired in the past week in reading the short published descriptions of the other lectures. Each one suggested to me another facet or connection with the emerging revisionist analysis of the early avant garde.

Of the other two terms used to describe the field, "independent" has the advantage of specifying both an economic and intentional situation (separate from the Hollywood commercial system and made by people who set their own priorities in art making), but it can just as plausibly be used to discuss much of the documenary film tradition. "Experimental" represents a stance in relation to the mode of filmmaking itself, and is perhaps the best overall term at present. At least for my purposes, which is to include what I call experimental documenary along with narrative, lyrical, and visual innovation, of which I will speak shortly.

So, to be engaged in a revisionist history of the U.S. independent film movement of the 20s and 30s, as I am along with a number of other scholars, is an act which is itself informed by and a reflection on the current issues of avant garde film and video. The Hanhardt and Sitney histories had a hidden agenda which was to validate one specific tradition [within the independent sector, one which basically can be interpreted largely within the framework of Clement Greenberg's (and similar) aesthetics, one which validates those works which can be interpreted as being about the process of art, about the investigation of its own nature. Both end with a validation of the cinematic rough equivalent of abstract expressionism, and then the emergence of "structural" film as the logical continuation of the visionary concerns of an earlier period. "Structural film" is closest to minimalism in painting. And it is no mistake that this fits the dominant Cold War agenda for intellectuals of the time Sitney and Hanhardt were writing.

Of course it does no good to simply construct another alternative history which also rests on a hidden agenda. Rather, what can and should be done is to put the agenda up front so that all can see the way the present issues and priorities are helping to shape our perception of the past, both in terms of what we look for, how we construct the canon, and what aesthetic validation we give to different aspects of it. As we go back to look at the experimental film movement from the vantage point of today and the issues that surround current art, especially film and video, we must see things differently.

First of all, we must see things from a postmodern sensibility, which in film and video has a distinct tradition and character which I cannot detail here. But such a position lets us see the cinematic expressions of Pop Art, especially its appropriation of mass culture, as essential, and leads us back through Bruce Connor and Andy Warhol in film to Joseph Cornell. Such a sensibility also invites us to look for impure mixings, for example, for documentaries which become personal or expository or editorial rather than staying within the tradition of the social documentary in the John Grierson tradition. It allows us to look for comic work which goes beyond the rather sober tone of realism or even surrealism. And it also allows us to re-examine the documentary tradition and see much of its work in a different light, once which we might want to claim from an expanded understanding of the avant garde position.

And the presence of new social movements today which themselves are finding unique artistic expression as part of their political direction, calls on us to rethink our look backward for predecessors. and I'm thinking most immediately of AIDS media, of which we had a very stimulating expression a few weeks ago in the Block Gallery, but also Feminist and Black, Latino, and Asian film and video making. Of course we are not going back to find very many, , women making experimental work. We have only the example of Mary Ellen Bute in the 30s, and the sad truth that people of color did not have access to film and video training equipment and the necessary budgets to produce such work. Indeed, it is only in the late 50s with Edward Bland's THE CRY OF JAZZ that we have the first example of experiential media art by an African American. However, that very awareness should help us think more critically, more fully, about what we do have from the past.

But I'm getting ahead of myself , something which is perhaps inevitable when trying to construct a more dialectical history. So let me stop for a moment and mark one very important material factor in the contemporary revision of experimental film. That factor is the remarkable increase in film archives and programs of acquisition and preservation in the past ten years or so. It is only now, partly through the preservation program of the American Film Institute and the NEA, and through the work of individual archivists and historians that we are beginning to uncover and establish the objects, the actual films, which form our past. Many have already been lost, but there are also new discoveries being made, and copies of rare films being made, so that we are in the process of finding

a lost or obscured series of film which actually form an aesthetically significant body of work from before WW2.

Having explained some of the problems in finding a pre-WW2 avant garde cinema, I'm in a position to discuss this still emerging field. In moving back to the dim halls of the past and of cinema itself, we are fortunate to discover a guide for this journey, a Virgil, in the form of Lewis Jacobs, one of the early historians of U.S. cinema, as well as a filmmaker and participant in the creation of a film culture in the 20s, 30s and 40s. Unfortunately, Jacobs pioneering history, which was a standard work in the 60s was found to have many problems of fact and interpretation when scholars proceeded to do more specialized studies of the American cinema, and thus the appendix to his history of commercial film, an essay, "experimental Cinema in America: 1921-1947," has been neglected by subsequent researchers, but in that essay, written in 1947 from his direct memory of films and filmmakers, he indicates several dozen innovative independent predecessors to Maya Deren, and he also expands the field beyond purely visionary concerns. Though we still do not have preserved and accessible many of the works Jacobs mentions, it is clear from reading his account that a major retrospective of this work and a reassessment of it would drastically alter current norms. For example, we have yet to come to terms with the highly poetic and abstract organization of photographer and filmmakers Ralph Steiner's studies *H2O* and *Surf and Seaweed*. The abstract light, shadow and sound compositions of Mary Ellen Bute also deserve reconsideration as aesthetic objects in their own right as well as early examples of graphic

cinema in the US (she was also the first to use electronic imagery in film for experimental purposes--a precursor of computer graphics). Similarly James Sibley Watson and Melville Webber's *Lot in Sodom* (1934), formerly assigned a low place in the overly art historical sequencing of experiential film history, which assigned it a position as a pale imitation of German Expressionism, takes on a different character in light of the important current reconstruction of gay and lesbian film history. Here is Jacobs description:

In its brilliant array of diaphanous shots and scenes, --smoking plains, undulating curtains, waving candle flames, glistening flowers, voluptuous faces, sensual bodies, frenzied orgies--were so smoothly synthesized on the screen that the elements of each composition seemed to melt and flow into one another with extraordinary iridescence.

Most startling in Jacob's history is his mention of 15 films from the early 30s which he sees as directly derived from Dziga Vertov's theory and practice. Given the current positive re-evaluation of Vertov, heightened by Annette Michelson's recent critical edition of the Soviet documentary writings, a retrospective of these American children of the Russian innovator would be topical and revealing. Jacobs himself wrote as a leading critic of independent film in the Early 30s. With others he published five issues of *Experimental Cinema* (1930-1933) which championed both left wing politics and innovative filmmaking. (you can see why I prefer to use the term Experimental). With a special interest in Soviet film, the magazine included translations from and discussions of

the Russian cinema and tried to save Einstein's *Que viva Mexico* from Upton Sinclair's mutilation. In the second issue Jacobs argued that critics needed to replace their moral, literary, and pictorial approaches to film by understanding film as a plastic art based on time, motion, and image. Articles in *Experimental Cinema* also took up issues of unionization in Hollywood, imperialist exploitation of Cuban images and movie markets, and the development of a worker's cinema. *Experimental cinema* did not last very long, but it gave evidence of radical film professionals with a genuine native concern for developing politically and aesthetically progressive cinema in the U.S.

According to Jacobs, worsening economic conditions and rising political resistance pushed most independents toward social documentary by the mid-30s. Two excellent recent studies of the 30s Worker's Film and Photo League and related political documentary by William Alexander and Russell Campbell detail that history. The radical documentaries were formally as well as politically innovative, especially when compared to the commercial newsreel and travelogue type of documentary prevalent at the time. For example, instead of shots of demonstrations placed safely beyond the action, taken with telephoto lenses and cameras mounted on tripods, the Film and Photo League newwreels showed hand held shots from the midst of the protestors. Nevertheless, the overall production of those films usually subordinated artistic innovation to an assumed need for conventional communication, populist and Popular Front rhetoric, and *Native Land*, arguably the movement's greatest achievement, has a call to yeomanry and patriotic values which seems strangely naive and

sentimental to later radicals. Although, with a slight update, in fact it has almost the same rhetoric as the Reagan presidency with a patriotic and optimistic appeal to the white working man and a strata of middle class that was a core of the Reagan constituency. It's curious how 40 years later we find a conservative Movie Star president using the same discourse in the 1980s as we find in an avowedly left wing film from 1941.

From a contemporary perspective, I find much more compelling some of the League's marginal works such as Mauric Bailens well executed home movies of May Day marches and communist picnics--fascinating for their visual documentation of everyday life in the Party--and C.O. Nelson's *Halsted Street*, a long travelling shot on the famous Chicago Street, displaying daily life and diverse ethnic neighborhoods. The comic sort *Pie in the Sky* (Elia Kazan, Molly Day Thatcher, Irving Lerner, and Ralph Steiner) uses simple camera and editing tricks with a partially improvised sorty satirizing the Salvation Army approach to the Depressions suffering--a visual repetition of the old Wobblie song, *They'll Pie in the Sky When you Die, That's a Lie.*" The short silent film contains an antic set of adventures showing down-and-outers having spontaneous fun in a junkyard. When a film asserts a vision of the oppressed's creative imagination, it stands out as notably different from the more common image of noble suffering and virtuous leftism often used in the social documentary tradition.

Jacobs mentions two additional developments that shaped experiential cinema. In 1935 the Museum of Modern art recognized film as an art worthy of support by beginning the low cost distribution of notable classics to nonprofit exhibitors. This distribution service created the basis for film study in university classrooms and exhibition in film societies. In addition, MoMA's regular screenings of film art had a profound effect in New York city (traditionally the US city with the heaviest per capita movie attendance) by providing general public access to otherwise unseen work.

Following up on Jacob's lead, a number of curators and scholars are now involved in a major reassessment of the experiential film, the first results of which will be forthcoming in Jan-Christopher Horak's anthology, *Early American Avant garde Film (1919-1945)*. As I mentioned before, the opportunity to do archival research, to find and view films previously unknown or unavailable is changing our understanding of what a film history of this period might be.